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AUTHOR Lattey, Elsa
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ABSTRACT

Foreigner talk (FT) has been characterized as speech "used by speakers of a language to outsiders who are felt to have limited command of a language or no knowledge of it," or "the variety of language that is regarded by a speech community as primarily appropriate for addressing foreigners." A study was carried out in Germany to discover by means of a comparison of English and German FT why FT in Germany appears obtrusive in contrast to FT in the United States where it does not stand out. Three data-collection procedures were used: (1) a self-analysis elicitation of 10 stimulus sentences translated from Ferguson's stimulus sentences in a similar project in the United States in English, (2) secret recordings of FT responses to requests for directions by two foreign students, and (3) openly recorded native-foreign interaction in a municipal office for foreigner matters. The differences in the processes involved in FT are variously reflected in the two languages. Simplification processes lead to language-specific variation. Clarification processes seem to be the same for both languages. Expressive/identifying processes are also the same, although it appears that the familiar pronoun "du" is used more frequently with those national groups perceived to be lower down on the status hierarchy scale. The 10 sentences used in the data collection are appended. (AMH)

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Foreigner Talk in the U.S. and Germany: Contrast and Comparison[1]

The discussion of a particular variety or register of speech known as foreigner talk (FT) has gained momentum since Ferguson's coining of the term in the late sixties (Clyne 1981:5). As so often happens, once the child has a name it becomes easier to talk about.

Two aspects of FT have been mentioned in defining the term: Ferguson (1971:43) characterized FT as "used by speakers of a language to outsiders who are felt to have very limited command of a language or no knowledge of it at all." Ferguson & DeBose (1977:103) talk of "the variety of language that is regarded by a speech community as primarily appropriate for addressing foreigners." The two aspects, which are worth distinguishing, are reflected in used by speakers vs. regarded by a speech community as appropriate. That is, the one refers to actual use of language in the communication situation, the other to reflection on what one might say in a particular imagined context.

These two types of approach are reflected in the methods of data collection enumerated by Ferguson & DeBose (1977:104):

a) "elicitation from informants who report on how they or others ... speak to foreigners"
b) "experimental investigation in which investigators play the role of foreigners," and
c) "recordings of native-foreign interaction in a natural communicative setting".

The two approaches get at basically different types of data. Method a) yields data that provide information about how native speakers regard their language, what they consider to be complex,

1. A condensed version of this paper was presented at the Linguistic Society of America annual meeting, New York, Dec. 1981.

and where they feel that simplification can be fruitfully attempted. To a great extent this capacity of the native speaker is akin to his ability to write telegrams, or better yet, to take notes.

Methods b) and c) yield data that provide information about one's functioning in communicative interaction (CI), the ability to hone in on the interlocutor's level and style of understanding. To some extent native speakers, when actually speaking with foreigners, make use of the products of a self-analysis such as that gotten at by method a), but beyond this they respond to the actual demands of the communication situation, to feedback -- or lack of it -- from the foreigner.

They thus exhibit a strategic competence as described by Canale and Swain (1980:30): "verbal and non-verbal communication strategies that may be called into action to compensate for breakdowns in communication due to performance variables or to insufficient competence." Tarone, who suggests that this strategic competence must have some universal aspect because "it is used to bridge the gaps between two linguistic or sociolinguistic systems", characterizes it as follows: "the ability to employ strategies of language use in the attempt to reach communicative goals" (1980:422).

The two types of data collection procedure mentioned above thus differ with respect to the role of strategic competence -- in the case of method a) it is primarily grammatical and sociolinguistic competence that play a role,[2] while in methods b) and c) strategic competence also significantly determines utterance production. Canale & Swain (1980: 30-31) identify two main types of communication strategy: "those that relate primarily to grammatical competence (e.g.

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2. Grammatical competence includes "knowledge of lexical items and of rules of morphology, syntax, sentence-grammar semantics, and phonology"; sociolinguistic competence is made up of "sociocultural rules of use and rules of discourse" (Canale & Swain 1980:29-30).

how to paraphrase grammatical forms that one has not mastered or cannot recall momentarily) and those that relate more to sociolinguistic competence (e.g. various role-playing strategies, how to address strangers when unsure of their social status)." Users of FT will be motivated in the development and use of both types of strategy by their assessment of their interlocutors' mastery of the language.

A further distinction between the two types of data collection procedure can be found in their relation to simplifying and clarifying processes, as discussed in Ferguson (1977) and Ferguson & DeBose (1977). Simplifying processes "reduce the phonetic, syntactic, or semantic complexity" of an utterance, while clarifying processes add redundancy, "as it were to facilitate comprehension" (Ferguson 1977:29-30). The former include "reduction of consonant clusters, [of] inflectional morphology, subordination, and lexicon, as well as limitation of content to the concrete here and now", while the latter include "slow, careful enunciation and louder voice; the repetition of syllables, words, phrases, and sentences; the paraphrasing of words, phrases and sentences; the use of attention-calling and feedback-seeking devices such as vocative particles, tag questions, and interrogative form of sentences" (Ferguson 1977:30). The data to be reported on in this paper are of both types, method a) and methods b) and c).

My own research into FT began in response to the subjective impression that FT in Germany stands out like a sore thumb, while that in the U.S. has never been particularly obtrusive, the stereotypes and caricatures of such talk occurring in films and the media and in literary texts notwithstanding.

The goal of the current investigation was to discover by means of a comparison of English and German FT why the impressions of the two varieties should differ so greatly. In pursuit of this goal, the several types of data mentioned above were examined:

1) A self-analysis elicitation similar to that discussed in Ferguson 1975, using translations into German of Ferguson's stimulus sentences (see Appendix). The ten utterances were presented to 19 native speakers of German and one fluent German-English bilingual (18 university students and two 10th graders).
2) Secret recordings of FT responses to requests for directions by two foreign students, a Brazilian and a Black African, pretending to have a very limited knowledge of German. Germans were approached in stores and on the street.
3) Openly recorded native-foreign interaction in a "natural" setting, the municipal office for foreigner matters in a university town in southwestern Germany. Here evidence of pronounced FT behavior was found only in interaction with a Turkish couple (Turks rank lowest on the foreigner hierarchy in Germany and so are most likely to elicit FT). Conversations with other foreigners -- Americans, Greeks, etc. -- were conducted in standard German.

Ferguson (1977:28) and Hatch et al (1978) list a number of features characteristic of English FT. These and others from the German data can be grouped into three major categories:

a) simplifying processes
b) clarifying processes,

as mentioned above, and

c) expressive/identifying processes (e.g. greater use of diminutives, frequent use of status markers, Ferguson 1977:30-31).

a) The first of these categories, the simplifying processes, where the differences between English and German FT are primarily found, includes the use of:

short sentences
simple sentences, i.e., little embedding, and
various kinds of omission.

Among the items omitted are:

1. articles

E: 89% omission G: 50% GCI: 64%

(the English figures are derived from Ferguson 1975; the German figures from my analogous study; the German communicative interaction data are from the two sets of recorded interviews)

The observable percentage distinction between German and English has a plausible language-specific explanation.

English has a definite and an indefinite article: the and a/an. German has the following correspondences: der (masc.) / die (fem.) / das (neut.) and ein (masc.) / eine (fem.) / ein (neut.), which exhibit further distinctions to indicate different relationships among the participants in an event -- what has traditionally been discussed in terms of case, but is more coherently seen in terms of a ranking of participants (Zubin 1978). The German articles therefore carry the higher functional load. While the English articles indicate only identification needed and made vs. not made, the inflection of the German articles additionally signals gender of the nouns and the relationships among the participants in the event. Speakers are thus more reluctant to omit them because to do so would be to sacrifice considerably more communicative information.

2. copula

E: 89% omission G: 50% GCI: 42%

Again the difference in percentages can be explained on the basis of language-specific features, namely the English data's including the progressive occurrences of be; German has no such progressive. (A similar auxiliary omission in German FT occurs in my data with the auxiliary haben 'have' in the perfect; cf. percentages at 5. below.) As far as the GCI figure for copula omission is concerned, it must be pointed out that quantification

is more difficult in communicative interaction, as it is not always clear what a non-occurring verb would have been had it been supplied.

3. pronoun subjects

E: Ferguson's report on his data indicates that it is not always clear whether a pronoun subject has been omitted or not; nevertheless he cites 18 instances of subject-pronoun absence.[3]

G: Omission quantification is not totally reliable here either, but ca. 25% (+ 7% that were replaced by nouns, 1% replaced by demonstratives)

GCI: Not quantifiable; an omitted subject might just as well have been a noun or a demonstrative.

4. conjunctions

E: 72% omission G: 33% GCI: not quantifiable

Why the tendency to conjunction omission should be more than twice as strong in English than in German is not yet clear to me.

5. inflectional endings

The loss of inflectional endings results in the neutralization of -- that is, the loss of information regarding -- person, number and tense.

Ferguson reports that for Sentence 1 in English, which contains the perfect form of the verb to see, i.e., have(n't) seen, 83% of the respondents replaced this verb form with the infinitive.

In the analogous German study, a total of 90% of the respondents replaced the full perfect, habe gesehen, but only 30% did so with the infinitive sehen. The remaining 60% used the participle gesehen, in effect only omitting the auxiliary rather than replacing the perfect with an infinitive.

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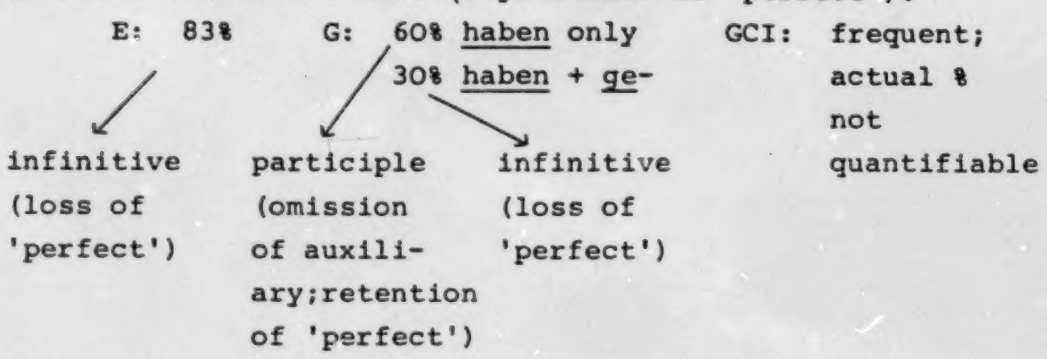
3. Because of the uncertainty as to where pronouns ought to have been, it is not possible to convert this figure to a percentage.

For Sentence 1 the comparison of the three bodies of data thus looks like this (replacement of 'perfect'):


E: 83%
G: 60% haben only
30% haben + ge-
GCI: frequent; actual % not quantifiable
infinitive (loss of 'perfect')
participle (omission of auxiliary; retention of 'perfect')
infinitive (loss of 'perfect')

A quantitative comparison between English and German for the remaining sentences in the experimental corpus is not possible because Fe[illegible]son does not give specific results. Looking at the German data only, however, we find that the loss of inflectional endings on verbs is as follows: There are a total of 152 potential non-copula 1st or 3rd person singular verbs in the experimental corpus. 76 of these occur in the perfect in the stimulus sentences, 76 in simple past or present.

Of the 76 perfects, 32 (or 42%) are rendered in the infinitive, 38 (or 50%) occur in the past participle form (i.e., they occur without the auxiliary)[4], two (3%) are simply omitted, two (3%) have the participle gegeben replaced by its reciprocal bekommen, which is, however, nondistinct as to whether it is intended as an infinitive or a participle. There is also one idiosyncratic solution -- the use of a reduplicated pidgin or baby-talk form: looky-looky.

Of the 76 simple verb forms, 36 (47%) are rendered in the infinitve, 23 (30%) occur as conjugated simple verbs[5],

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4. There are three instances where the auxiliary does occur, but even here it shows up as haben, a form inappropriate to the first person subject. Haben may be either infinitive or first or third person plural, as indicated above.

5. In Sentence 3, where the stimulus sentence has a simple past verb form, the conjugated verbs in the responses were almost all (7 out of 8) rendered in the present, and not always with the proper personal inflection, i.e., 2 occurred with a first-person ending.

three (4%) are given as participles, two (3%) are omitted. The remaining 17% comprise ingenious solutions, including:

7% -- 5 of the responses substitute a first or third person plural subject (where the conjugated verb form is identical with the infinitive)

1% -- 1 response puts the verb into the future: wird arbeiten 'will work'; here again the main verb form is identical with the infinitve

7% -- 5 of the responses rephrase the verb into a locative adverbial: weg 'away' or dabei/ bei ihm 'with him'

1% -- 1 response uses the empathetic Italian verb avanti 'go'[6]

We thus see a strong tendency in German to constrain verbal forms to the non-tensed infinitives and participles.[7] This tendency -- which avoids complicating the communication with additional information that needs to be processed, here references to person and tense -- undoubtedly also exists in English foreigner talk. It is, however, considerably more obvious in German. With the exception of the verb to be, the English infinitive is identical to the conjugated present-tense verb form for all persons except third singular, whereas in German the infinitive is the same form as only first and third person plural. Consequently, when the inflected verb form is omitted, i.e., replaced by the infinitive, there are many more instances in German where this leads to an unacceptable utterance. This, then, is one source of the different impact of German vs. English foreigner talk.

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6. Actually 'let's go' or 'hurry up'.
7. And where tensed forms are used, to keep to the present.

As far as the inflectional ending reduction that produces a neutralization of number on nouns is concerned, our English - German comparison provides the following information: In Sentence 8, the only sentence in the experimental corpus containing a plural noun, the English plural morpheme -s tends to be omitted. It is, of course, a redundant feature in this particular sentence -- the presence of the numeral two adequately signals plurality to the hearer/reader.

All the more surprising, then, is the fact that the German respondents tended to include the plural marker for this sentence, the final -e on Gewehre, despite its cooccurrence with the numeral zwei 'two'. The communicative interaction data also appear to support this retention of the plural marker. In the municipal office, all occurring plurals were marked: Kinder, Jahre, Pässe 'children', 'years', 'passports', even though the plurality was clear from the context. In the conversations on the street, the following occurred: Auto (singular) alternated with Autos (plural) -- however, it must be pointed out that the form without -s is acceptable as a plural in the local dialect; Kotschen 'cars', derived from Italian, was used, but marked with a German plural ending, -en; Schaufenster, 'display window(s)', occurred, but this form is nondistinct as to singular and plural.

The observed tendency to retain the plural marker in German -- even in the face of redundancy -- may be due to the multiplicity of plural endings in German (there are 9 different regular plurals) in contrast to the one regular English plural -s (although the latter, of course, has three different phonetic shapes : [s] , [z] , and [əz] .) Or, it may be a carryover of the reluctance to dispense with inflectional matter in other contexts where it carries a higher functional load.

In addition to the above features of simplifying processes, named by researchers working with English FT but applicable as well to German FT, the German respondents suggested the following as characteristic of FT as they imagine it:

use of nouns instead of pronouns as an attempt at concretizing, e.g.

Sentence 5: Gestern ich Mann gesehen.
'Yesterday I man seen.'

This strategy was actually used in 7% of the subject pronouns, e.g.

Sentence 10: Morgen Frau gehen.
'Tomorrow woman go.'

Sentence 6: Mann arbeiten mit mir.
'Man work with me.'

Each of these sentences had a stimulus pronoun (ihn, 'him'; sie 'she', and er 'he').

simplification of the lexicon, e.g.

tragen 'carry' ⟶ haben 'have'

an adjustment of word order to

subject + object(s) + infinitive

(This sequence is normal for utterances with auxiliaries and modals -- where the auxiliary occurs between subject and object -- but not for present or simple past, where the sequence is subject + verb + object. The infinitive and final position are both also reminiscent of the form of public commands and requests, cf. Ferguson 1977, e.g. Nicht hinauslehnen 'do not lean out'; drücken 'push', ziehen 'pull'.)

b) The second category of adjustments in speech are the clarifying processes, described in considerable detail for English in Hatch et al (1978). They include:

repetition
restatement
analytical paraphrase
including what is normally omitted (e.g. imperative subjects)
separating elements normally fused (e.g. avoiding contractions)
confirmation checking
slow, loud, distinct pronunciation

This particular category of processes appears to have a relatively low salience. In response to the question how they would most likely adjust their speech in communicating with someone whose knowledge of the language was limited, only three German respondents said they would speak slowly, one each mentioned repetition and stress.

Yet it is this category in which the differences between English and German FT seem to disappear (as observed in communicative interaction). All of the processes mentioned for English also occur in German. The first two, repetition and restatement, are especially frequent, as seen in the following native speaker attempts at giving directions to non-natives:

NS: Hier Auto durch und hier Ammergasse. Hier durch. Hier durch. 'Here car through and here Ammer Lane. Here through. Here through.'

NS: Wirtschaft. Lokal. Kneipe. Verstehen? Nix. Ah, Wirtschaft. Lokal. Café.
'Bar. Tavern. Pub. Understand? No, ah, bar. Tavern. Café.'

NS: Über die Ammer weg. Über das Wasser weg. Über den Fluß, den Bach. 'Across the Ammer. Across the water. Across the river, the stream.'

Restatement sometimes gives way to a kind of analytic paraphrase, as in the GCI utterance:

NS: Und wie heißen die Kinder? Name von Kinder?

'And what are the children called?[8] Name of children?'

where the verb heißen 'be called' is analyzed into something like 'what is name of'.

c) The third and final category given in Ferguson 1977 is expressive/identifying processes. The primary indicators of these are:

lexical items like savvy. In the German data Kotschen (< Italian) for Autos 'cars' is an expression of empathy, "a temporary fusion of self/object boundaries" (Hatch et al 1978:58)[9].

status markers, usually in the form of "talking down" to the foreigner. An English example is boy used to black adults. In German the use of the familiar pronoun du rather than the polite Sie in talking to foreigners has been cited as an example of an expressive process (Ferguson 1977:31), and is consequently used more frequently to those national groups lower down on the hierarchy of foreigners. (This phenomenon, however, is potentially relevant to the simplifying category as well, for the use of du avoids the ambiguity of Sie/sie: the latter, especially when cooccurring with what looks like an infinitve form of the verb, may be equivalent to English you (polite), she, or they. Du can be only 2nd person singular.) Although the substitution of du for Sie is one of the stereotypes of German FT -- in Sentence 1, nine respondents used du, seven used Sie -- the abovementioned CI conversations recorded

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8. It should be pointed out that the more natural English translation of this question is: 'What are the children's names?' But that would have obscured the analytical paraphrase.

9. < Guiora, A. 1965. On Clinical Diagnosis and Prediction. Psychological Reports 17:779-84.

in Germany contained no instances of du. When present, however, this is another feature that accounts for the pronounced difference in impact of the English and German FTs, another feature deriving from differences in the two linguistic systems.

We have seen that there are differences in the processes involved in FT and that these differences are variously reflected in different languages. Simplification processes -- while proceeding in similar ways in English and German -- lead to language-specific variation, the impact of which on the hearer (or only on a non-involved third party?) depends on structural features of each language. Clarification processes, on the other hand, dealing as they do more with communicative interaction than with language analysis, appear to be the same, at least for these two languages -- although it is likely that this similarity holds true for other languages as well. Expressive/identifying processes, though as yet the least well defined of the three categories, also seem to operate in similar ways for both languages. Additional data involving many more topics and conversational contexts need to be examined in order to extend the comparison begun in the current investigation.

Appendix

Ferguson's English stimulus sentences (Ferguson 1975)

1. I haven't seen the man you're talking about.
2. He's my brother, he's not my father.
3. Did you understand what she said?
4. Come and see me tomorrow. Don't forget!
5. Yesterday I saw him and gave him some money.
6. He's working with me. He'll work with you too.
7. Who is that man? Is he your brother?
8. He always carries two guns.
9. Where's the money I gave you yesterday?
10. She's going tomorrow.

German translations (mine)

1. Ich habe den Mann, von dem Sie sprechen, nicht gesehen.
2. Er ist mein Bruder, er ist nicht mein Vater.
3. Haben Sie verstanden, was sie sagte?
4. Kommen Sie morgen zu mir. Vergessen sie's nicht!
5. Gestern habe ich ihn gesehen und ihm Geld gegeben.
6. Er arbeitet mit mir zusammen. Er wird auch mit Ihnen arbeiten.
7. Wer ist dieser Mann? Ist er dein Bruder?
8. Er trägt immer zwei Gewehre bei sich.
9. Wo ist das Geld, das ich Ihnen gestern gegeben habe?
10. Sie geht morgen.

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